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Some Observations on a Sharifian Genealogy of *Lij* Iyasu (Vatican Arabic ms 1796, folio 22v)

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Prolegomena

There is an enormous lacuna in our present knowledge of Islam in Ethiopia: the lack of information about the human groups, families and clans that claim an Arab ancestry. As it is well known from other parts of the Islamic world, these groups have played and still play a crucial role in many aspects of the Islamic societies. This is particularly true for the *sayyid* and *šarīf* lineages, directly related to the Prophet Muḥammad. However, also other lineages originating from the two first caliphs (Abū Bakr and ʿUmar: the *Bakrī* or *Šiddiqī* and *ʿUmarī* or *Fārūqī* ancestry), from clans of the Banū Hāšim and Qurayš and from companions of the Prophet (*Anṣārī* or *Šaḥābī* ancestry) tend to build up clearly identifiable social and cultural groups, with their own peculiar way to interact with the surrounding human environment, their own family history and a specific connection to the past of the Islamic communities where they live in.

This exceptionally important social and historical function of the groups of Arab descent has been relatively well studied in Somalia where not only the territorial location and diffusion of the numerous *ashraaf*, Bakrī, ʿUmarī and other generally Arab lineages are well known but also the different genealogical traditions have been collected and more or less carefully analyzed.¹

As a matter of fact, the first and fundamental way to gain insight into the complicated but vital universe of the different human groups that claim an Arab origin in the area is to collect their genealogies, especially those preserved in manuscripts.

Genealogical documents function in a double direction: vertically, they locate the group in a historical space-time dimension, keeping memory of the origins and the successive displacements through countries and regions. Horizontally, they describe a sort of social geography, building relationships with groups of more or less close

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¹ See for example Lewis (1994).

relatives, delimiting territories of allies and foes, creating friendships and enmities. Of course, the frame which a genealogy sets up is not fixed once and forever. A same genealogical document may be read differently according to changing social or historical circumstances, paving the way for alliances instead of conflicts; moreover, the possibility of rewriting or reshaping a genealogical tradition is always at hand and can be used whenever necessary to correct the chain of names and adjust it to some new exigency.

In the Islamic tradition, a specialized category of learned men was and is in charge of preserving and transmitting the genealogical knowledge. The *nassāb* (pl. *nassāba*) are the recognized keepers of the science of *nasab* (pl. *ansāb*).² Their work, their books, their huge collections of intricate genealogical trees, whose branches extend through centuries and countries, are the only reference to rightly classify the lineages. The judgment of a *nassāb*, who has gained fame in his field and is considered reliable in disentangling the bulk of the genealogical material, is the most important touchstone in the evaluation of a *nasab* chain. An Arab ancestry which has been approved by a renowned *nassāb* is thus a decisive element for the history and the social position of a human group living in a Muslim region.

One has to admit that scholars of Islam in Ethiopia have only a very vague idea of all this extremely complex and at the same time crucial manifestation of the Islamic culture and society.

The genealogical documents of most of the Ethiopian Muslim communities and families are practically unknown. Comparison among different *ansāb* is an untouched field and even the simple but exact knowledge of the geographical distribution of the groups boasting an Arab ancestry is still a desideratum. The name of no famous Ethiopian *nassāb* is known until now.

The urgent need to acquire information in this field is felt not only by the scholars but also by conscious Ethiopian Muslims: in this very year, a Muslim young man *sayyid* Abū al-Qāsim Ḥusayn al-‘Alawī, who started a personal research on the genealogy of his family, managed to put on line a first collection of Ethiopian *ansab*³: it is a first step in the right direction and I hope that it will be followed by many others.

In this general frame I should like to locate also the genealogy of *Lij* Iyasu that I am going to present and publish here. It is self evident that the nature of the personage not only allows but even imposes other interpretative approaches to the document. However, as the present speaker is basically an Islamicist, it is from the above sketched perspective that I prefer to conduct my analysis.

² On *nasab* in general see Franz Rosenthal, “Nasab”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*², vol. 7, p. 967.

³ The collection with an interesting introduction in Arabic is called *al-Sa’y wa-al-‘aṭāš li-ta’rif ašraf al-Habaša*. In the introduction the author laments the carelessness of the Muslims of Ethiopia in the field of genealogy. He explains this lack of interest also as a consequence of the respect due to noble families: no one has dared so far to ask them to show the documents proving their ancestry.

The document

The genealogical document I am going to deal with can be found in folio 22v of the Arabic manuscript number 1796 of the Vatican Library (fig. 1). The manuscript was acquired in Harar by Enrico Cerulli who published many of the texts which it contains. It was then donated by the Italian Ethiopianist to the Vatican Library. In 1965 Giorgio Levi Della Vida catalogued and described it (Levi Della Vida 1965: 158).

It is a simple half page written by a quite coarse and unrefined hand but in clear and readable *ductus*. Nothing is known about the scribe and also the origin of the text remains obscure. The writing presents a certain incertitude in the spelling of some names and from the point of view of grammar, a glaring error is present. The names in the *nasab* are numbered so that the reader is facilitated in distinguishing them getting at the same time an impression of accuracy.

Here I retype the *nasab* reproducing exactly the text as it is in the manuscript.⁴

هذا المرقوم نسب الملك الملوك [sic!]
 اميراطور الحبش سيد الياسا ابن^١ نجس ميكائيل ابن^٢ امام علي ابن^٣ امام ليين ابن^٤ امام محمد ابن^٥ امام احمد ابن^٦ امام محمد ابن^٧ علي
 ابن^٨ كودانا ابن^٩ بابو ابن^{١٠} داؤ الدين ابن^{١١} نور الدين ابن^{١٢} شمس الدين ابن^{١٣} نور حسين ابن^{١٤} دملكان ابن^{١٥} عبد الحميد ابن^{١٦}
 عيسى ابن^{١٧} سخي الله ابن^{١٨} امام نور ابن^{١٩} يعقوب ابن^{٢٠} جواهر ابن^{٢١} ياقوت ابن^{٢٢} محمود ابن^{٢٣} تاج الدين ابن^{٢٤} تمام ابن^{٢٥} محمد
 ابن^{٢٦} ابراهيم ابن^{٢٧} خليل ابن^{٢٨} نور ابن^{٢٩} احمد ابن^{٣٠} اسماعيل ابن^{٣١} يحيى ابن^{٣٢} تقي الله ابن^{٣٣} عمر ابن^{٣٤} موسى الكاظم ابن^{٣٥} عبد
 الله ابن^{٣٦} محمد باقير ابن^{٣٧} زيد [sic!] العابدين ابن حسن وحسين ابن علي ابن ابي طالب^٥ ابنا فاطمة بنت رسول الله صلى عليه
 وسلم ابن عبد الله

Here follows the translation and transcription of the genealogy:

This numbered text is the genealogy of the king of the kings.

Imperator of Ethiopia sayyid Iyāsū son of nigus (1) Mikā'īl son of imām (2) 'Alī son of imām (3) Liban son of imām (4) Muḥammad son of imām (5) Aḥmad son of imām (6) Muḥammad son of (7) 'Alī son of (8) Kawdānā son of (9) Bābū son of (10) Dawū' al-Dīn son of (11) Nūr al-Dīn son of (12) Šams al-Dīn son of (13) Nūr Ḥusayn son of (14) Dimalkān son of (15) 'Abd al-Ḥamīd son of (16) 'Isā son of (17) Saḥī Allāh son of (18) imām Nūr son of (19) Ya'qūb son of (20) Jawhar son of (21) Yāqūt⁶ son of (22) Maḥmūd son of (23) Taj al-Dīn son of (24) Tamām son of (25) Muḥammad son of (26) Ibrāhīm son of (27) Ḥalīl son of (28) Nūr son of (29) Aḥmad son of (30) Ismā'īl son of (31) Yaḥyā son of (32) Taqī Allāh son of (33) 'Umar son of (34) Mūsā al-Kāzīm son of (35) 'Abdallāh son of (36) Muḥammad (37) Bāqir son of (38) Zayd al-Ābidīn son of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn - son of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib - two sons of Fāṭima daughter of the Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him salvation) son of 'Abdallāh.

⁴ For technical reasons, I am not able to put the order number over the name of each bead of the chain of the genealogy as it is in the manuscript. I thus put it before the name and after the always repeated "Ibn"

⁵ The name is written between the lines in the reverse way.

⁶ The name Yāqūt was written over the line after Ya'qūb was canceled; Ya'qūb is however still clearly readable.

هذه المرقوم نسب الملك الملوك ١
 أمير طور الحيشن سيده الياسوا ابن نجسن ميكائيل ابن امام
 علي ابن امام ليث ابن امام محمد ابن امام احمد ابن امام محمد
 ابن علي ابن كودا ابن ياقوا ابن داوود ابن نور الدين
 ابن شمس الدين ابن نور حسين ابن دملكان ابن عبد الحميد
 ابن عيسى ابن سيفي الله ابن امام نور ابن يعقوب ابن
 جوهري ابن يعقوب ابن محمود ابن تاج الدين ابن تمام
 ابن علي ابن ابراهيم ابن خليل ابن نور ابن احمد ابن اسماعيل
 ابن يحيى ابن تقي الله ابن عمر ابن موسى الكاظم ابن عبد الله
 ابن محمد ابن ربيع الطاهر ابن حسن و حسين ابنا علي
 ست رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ابن عبد الله

Fig 1.: Vatican Arabic ms 1796, folio 22v

Some first observations

This is not the first time that a genealogy of *Lij* Iyasu comes into discussion. More exactly: the genealogy of the *Mammedoch* dynasty to which the Ethiopian ruler belonged had already attracted the attention of the scholars and the ancestry of *Nigus* Mika'él, father of Iyasu, was fairly well known. Moreover, the idea that *Lij* Iyasu had spread among his Muslim subjects a genealogy which made him a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad is widely attested in several sources of different origin and bias.⁷

Summarizing the available data on this point, one finds:

- a genealogy of *Lij* Iyasu published by Budge (1928: 546-547) which retraces his ancestry to the Prophet Muḥammad. It is not clear where Budge read and transcribed his source.
- Domenico Brielli (1945) edited by Carlo Conti Rossini reconstructing the history of Wello dealt at length with the *Mammedoch* and enumerated all the member of the ruling family.
- The regretted Hussein Ahmed (2001: 203) published a genealogy of the *Mammedoch* family down to *Lij* Iyasu that he drew from oral sources and from the scholarly literature.
- Finally Eloi Ficquet (2007) collected together all the previous information in a encyclopedic article.

The more or less significant differences between the known genealogical lists and the present Arabic document will be mentioned in the following. This is definitely the first time that an Arabic *nasab* of *Lij* Iyasu is published.

To analyze with ease the content of the genealogy, I will divide it in three sections: starting from Iyasu up to (8) Kawdānā son of (9) Bābū; then, from (10) Dawū' al-Dīn to Dimalkān son of (15) 'Abd al-Ḥamīd; and finally, from (33) 'Umar son of (34) Mūsā al-Kāzīm to Muḥammad the Prophet.

The first section of the nasab

The first section of the *nasab* is the commonly known genealogy of the *Mammedoch* family which ends with the founder of the dynasty Godaanaa son of Babboo. In this part of the *nasab* one may find only one major peculiarity: *imām* (3) Liben is said to be the son of *imām* (4) Muḥammad son of *imām* (5) Aḥmad (i.e. *imām* Amedé Kolasé or K^welasi or *tilliq*). The insertion of the name of an *imām* (4) Muḥammad son of *imām* (5) Aḥmad contradicts most of the known genealogies of the *Mammedoch* where Liben is son of Amedé Kolasé and an *imām* Muḥammad is not mentioned. It is not apparently explainable from where this name actually came: it is nevertheless attested also in the genealogy of Iyasu published by Budge where “Imam Lihan” [sic !] is son of “Imam Muḥammad II”.

⁷ See for example Hayle Sillasé I (1965 a.m.: 31) and Asfa-Wossen Asserate (2007: 31, 376)

The second section of the nasab

(10) Dawū' al-Dīn is clearly a misspelling of the scribe for the name Dawā' al-Dīn (ar. "the medicine of the religion") which is also mentioned in the list of Budge.

The names up to (13) Nūr Ḥusayn: (11) Nūr al-Dīn son of (12) Šams al-Dīn are present also in the genealogy of the *Mammedoch* published by Hussein Ahmed.

Nūr Ḥusayn is the most revered Muslim saint of Ethiopia. His full genealogy is well known and was published together with his two hagiographies several times in the country. It is thus possible to make a comparison.⁸

The string (12) Šams al-Dīn son of (13) Nūr Ḥusayn son of (14) Dimalkān is problematic as Nūr Ḥusayn is not given a son named Šams al-Dīn in his *nasab al-šarīf*; as for Dimalkān, it is an evident misspelling for Malkā'i, the nickname of Ibrāhīm, father of šayḥ Ḥusayn.

The ancestry given in this genealogy for Nūr Ḥusayn son of (14) Dimalkān up to (34) Mūsā al-Kāzīm is really puzzling and quite astonishing.

The *nasab al-šarīf* of šayḥ Ḥusayn does not claim a *šarīfian* origin for the holy man of Bale but retraces his forefathers up to 'Aqīl b. Abī Ṭālib, older brother of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and cousin of the Prophet. The *Aqīlid* ancestry is a widespread *nasab* in Northeast Africa.

As for the present genealogy, one has moreover to note that the whole series of name from (14) Dimalkān up to (34) Mūsā al-Kāzīm cannot be found elsewhere. It really an *unicum*, at least so far.

The third section of the nasab

The third part of the genealogy is easy to check as it has its pivotal point in (34) Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. around 800) the seventh *imām* of the Twelver Shia whose *nasab* up to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Fāṭima daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad is of course very well known and established once forever.

Once more one cannot help feeling much surprised by some evident mistakes in the succession of the names in the chain. The string (33) 'Umar son of (34) Mūsā al-Kāzīm son of (35) 'Abdallāh son of (36) Muḥammad (37) Bāqir son of (38) Zayd al-'Ābidīn son of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn - son of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib - two sons of Fāṭima daughter of the Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him salvation) son of 'Abdallāh is a collection of errors and shortcomings.

⁸ The *nasab* of šayḥ Ḥusayn was printed for the first time in the *Kitāb rabī' al-qulūb fī dīkr manāqib wa-faḍā'il sayyidina al-šayḥ Nūr Ḥusayn Raḍya Allāh 'anhu wa-yalīb kitāb nuzbat al-asrār wa-ṭabārat al-aqdār fī manāqibib wa-faḍā'ilih ayḍan*, Addis Ababa: al-Maktaba al-Ḥusayniyya - Cairo: Maṭba'at al-šarq, 1927 (1345 a.h.), pp. 63-71. See also Andrzejewski (1975: 139-140).

First of all, Mūsā is son of the sixth *imām* Ġaʿfar al-Šādiq (d. 765) and grandson of the fifth *imām* Muḥammad *al-Bāqir* (d. around 735): the name ʿAbdallāh as the one of his father was perhaps originated by the *kunya* of Ġaʿfar – Abū ʿAbdallāh; the separation of the name of Muḥammad from the nickname *Bāqir* as if they were two distinct persons is really inexplicable. Almost every average Muslim – Shiite and Sunni as well – knows the nicknames of the twelve imams and could not sever Muḥammad from *al-Bāqir*.

Secondly, the name of the son of Mūsā al-Kāzīm (33) ʿUmar is not attested in any of the collections of genealogical traditions of the descendants of ʿAli b. Abī Ṭālib: it is thus an *apax*. This is perhaps the most sensitive point in the whole genealogical chain, as ʿUmar represent the link between the Alid – prophetic section of the *nasab* and the Ethiopian descendents: an evident inconsistency in the name of this link person means a failure in the whole structure of the genealogy.

Some tentative conclusions

To sum up: I have briefly scrutinized this Arabic *nasab* of *lij* Iyasu in the light of some current but accredited sources of the Arabic Islamic genealogical science and in comparison with one of the best known Ethiopian Islamic genealogies (ṣayb Ḥusayn). The clear result is that this genealogical document suffers of an intrinsic weakness: not only it has many scattered inaccuracies and shortcomings but also it is clamorously inconsistent in retracing the ancestry of its most famous names. The result is that the *nasab* is at great variance with other similar documents and presents many *apax* that set it completely apart from the conglomerate of trees and branches of other sharifian families.

This is to say that this genealogy does not reach the standard of reliability according to the criteria fixed by the science of Islamic *nasab*. One can infer from the reading of the succession of the names that the writer of this *nasab* was not sufficiently acquainted with the principles of the science of traditional Islamic genealogy.

It is not known whether the document circulated or not among Muslims. Also the circumstances of its writing are obscure. The question of who was this clumsy *nassāb* and why he took the decision of writing such an unsatisfying genealogical document must for the moment remain unanswered.

It is however quite evident that a claim of a sharifian ancestry could not be seriously supported among at least learned Muslims by such a document which on the contrary could have given rise to many serious doubts in its readers.

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